

Good evening

Honored guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It's wonderful to see so many of you here this evening. I'm honored that so many distinguished guests have joined us to celebrate the proud history of our marquee educational exchange program in Vietnam.

Tonight is a chance for all of us to reflect on the first ten years of the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) program and think about the next ten.

The VEF program in Vietnam illustrates just how many common values we share. We both value education. We both value progress. And we're both striving for a better tomorrow. Vietnam today is a country of growth, development and innovation, thanks in large part to the great value placed on educational attainment. Exchanging ideas, experiences, and knowledge between American and Vietnamese people is a major part of our foreign policy, because we believe that educational exchanges like VEF open doors of opportunity not only for the people involved, but many others too.

Vietnam's future is directly tied to its ability to develop the leaders who will nurture it in the 21st century. And for that, I sincerely hope the VEF program will continue to play an important role. As we celebrate here this evening, I'd like to share some thoughts about how we can work together to make the next ten years of the VEF program even better.

As the first Vietnamese-American U.S. Consul General in HCMC, I have stood before audiences like you many times since August 2010 to extol the virtues of free trade, health care and education as the foundation of the bilateral relationship between the United States and Vietnam. During those three years, I have officially visited 32 of the 33 provinces in the Consulate General's HCMC Consular District. Such travel has given me an insight into the work and lives of Vietnamese officials and of people in all walks of life that makes it possible for us to effectively build closer ties between Vietnam and the United States, two countries I love dearly.

Our growing bilateral relationship has always been based on a common agreement on the importance of higher education as a tool for improving lives and society.

I understand that VEF currently has a network of 212 Alumni, comprised of 162 Fellows, 31 Visiting Scholars, and 19 U.S. Faculty Scholars. Last year, I had the privilege to observe the oral examinations of prospective Fellows, probably an event that the VEF alumni here tonight still remembers well, and I was extremely impressed with the caliber of the Fellowship finalists who ultimately started their graduate programs in the sciences, mathematics, medicine, engineering, and technology in the U.S.

In addition to VEF's efforts to bring some of Vietnam's brightest minds to the United States for academic training, I am very pleased by their efforts to bring VEF alumni together at this 5th VEF Alumni Conference in Nha Trang, Khanh Hoa this week.

I believe the kind of collaboration and community that this conference will provide, is an important element in the future development of Vietnam, and in the foundation of the growing relations between Vietnam and the United States. We all know that there is power in numbers. When those numbers include a select group of intelligent and highly trained individuals who share a common purpose, there is an even greater multiplier effect on the potential outcome.

It is no secret that Vietnam is in need of more academics and professionals trained in the hard sciences. In addition to the current VEF students and alumni, there are over 15,000 Vietnamese students currently earning their degrees at over 750 colleges and universities in the U.S. The U.S. is the world's second leading host of Vietnamese students, and Vietnam now ranks 8th among countries sending students to the U.S. As these numbers continue to grow, and I am working hard to do so, and as more graduates are networked together, I think there is great potential to improve research, advance technology, and affect real positive change here in Vietnam.

There have also been an increasing number of partnerships between American and Vietnamese universities, leading to joint programs that give even more Vietnamese students access to the gold-standard American education system. Your

participation in the VEF program, I sincerely hope, has opened your eyes to the hallmark of a U.S. education: American ways of approaching problems; helping you develop critical thinking skills; encouraging student involvement and participation; and allowing you an opportunity to broaden your horizons beyond Vietnam. It is our hope that you take the tools and training you acquire in the U.S. to come back and become valuable members of Vietnamese society. Your knowledge and skills will greatly benefit this country in the decades to come. For that reason, I'm also feeling optimistic about the future of U.S.-Vietnam relations.

The Vietnamese leadership has made ambitious pledges about cultivating the country's scientific elite and making better use of its talented young minds, to meet its stated goal of employing 20,000 PhDs by 2020.

You as VEF alumni can play an important and key role in influencing educational changes and reforms by "Giving Back to Vietnam." As VEF alumni, you are role models and sources of inspiration. As you well know, many alumni of U.S. study abroad who have returned made significant contributions to Vietnam's development. Indeed, one U.S. study abroad alumni recently became a member of the Politburo!

While achievements in political and social fields are perhaps more visible, it's the contributions of alumni in the fields of science, medicine, public health and engineering that have the potential to have an even more positive effect on the daily lives of millions of Vietnamese people. We hope that you will follow in the footsteps of some of the great alumni role models featured at this conference, who have returned to Vietnam and set about helping their fellow countrymen, and ensuring that VEF program benefits not only individual scholarship recipients, but all of society.

On a personal note, I will depart later this summer, so this is a farewell in some ways. To be able to return to Vietnam after 45 years, to my country of birth, to a city that I had lived in for the first 10 years of my life, and to be able to do so as the Consul General to the American Consulate General in HCMC is an incredible honor and a privilege.

This return to Vietnam has been a fascinating opportunity to live in a society going through a profound transition. On a personal level, it has had many wonderful moments, sometimes quite moving, which have given me a sense of unexpected continuity in life.

Overall, I would say that I depart with a sense that both our countries are now taking each other more seriously. The Vietnamese leadership assessed that the role of the U.S. in Vietnam's national security strategy is of great importance.

They decided that it is okay for the world and for the Vietnamese people to see that the U.S. is considered an important partner of Vietnam. From high-level visits to the U.S. and Vietnam by senior officials from both sides; regular Naval ship visits to Danang and Cam Ranh Bay; war legacy issues being addressed such as the ongoing remediation of dioxin at the Danang International airport site; easier access to Vietnam's leadership by our embassy, consulate and our official visitors; and a marked increase in positive press coverage of all aspects of our relationship. In the U.S., we also have noted increased interest by our executive branch leaders in meeting with senior Vietnamese visitors; more positive attention from Congress; and strengthened private sector interest.

I have enjoyed witnessing the development of this relationship – especially in the fields of economics, health care delivery, research and development, infrastructure, and education. The Government of Vietnam and the private sector have identified these areas as priorities in order to continue economic development toward becoming an industrialized country. In turn, the United States wants Vietnam to be a strong, independent, and prosperous nation.

I will depart Vietnam with many of the same thoughts that I had when I arrived here in August 2010. I have great respect and affection for the Vietnamese people, their entrepreneurial spirit, their respect for learning, their ability to focus on the future, and their unmatched sense of humor. I greatly value all the friends I have made throughout Vietnam, many of whom are in this room. Foreign policy in the 21st century is not only the work of governments but of the private sector, NGO's, universities, and all of those here this evening.

You, as VEF Alumni are uniquely positioned to contribute not only to your own professional success, but also the success of Vietnam, and the growth of the friendship between the United States and Vietnam. From my vantage point as a trained professional engineer, I see VEF alumni as an excellent resource in the potential establishment of centers of excellence in science and technology in Vietnam.

Tonight we are celebrating the success of the alumni of all Vietnam Education Foundation programs: Fellows, Visiting Scholars, and Faculty Scholars. I am thrilled to be here on this unique occasion and speak with all of you as one VEF family.

Congratulations again to our VEF alumni for your impressive achievements; you have been diplomats, scholars, and bridge-builders for the amazing progress of our diplomatic relations over the last ten years.

Please help us find the next stars, make our family bigger, and let's all meet again in 2023 and toast to 20 years of the Vietnam Education Foundation.

Lastly, my special thanks to Ms. Lynne McNamara, for her steady leadership as VEF Executive Director, as well as expressing deep gratitude and respect to her VEF Hanoi team, specifically Country Director Dr. Nguyễn Phượng, for their cooperation and liaison between the academia, VEF alumni, and the U.S. Mission in Vietnam. Thank you for your friendship and for all the good work which we are doing together.

I look forward to coming back to Vietnam many times and continuing to contribute to the development of the U.S.-Vietnam relations. I would like to offer a toast: to our improving relationship, may we continue to work together and continue to share the road towards a bright future.

Thank you.